



Evaluation of The Bay: A Blueprint for Recovery

Executive Summary

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The Wildlife Trust for
**Lancashire
Manchester &
North Merseyside**



Cumbria
Wildlife Trust

NHS

Lancashire &
South Cumbria
NHS Foundation Trust

eden project

Lancaster
University 

Background

The Bay: A Blueprint for Recovery is a multi-agency partnership between The Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside, Cumbria Wildlife Trust, The Eden Project, and Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust. It aims to reduce loneliness and isolation in Morecambe Bay's communities while also delivering ecological benefits. The project secured £880,000 from the People's Postcode Lottery for September 2021 to August 2023. All data in this report covers the period to the end of April 2023.

The Bay is a multi-level project, with four levels of work:

- Specialist nature and wellbeing groups for people experiencing social exclusion and isolation, taking green social prescription (GSP) referrals from the NHS and community groups, as well as self-referrals.
- Targeted community engagement for people at risk of social exclusion and isolation, through public events such as strandline hunts and beach cleans.
- Whole population work which aims to increase the number of people interacting with nature and taking action for nature.
- Business development to test commercial ideas for generating income, and to share the project's learnings with other coastal communities.

It is also a multi-site project, with delivery staff located around Morecambe Bay in three hubs at Barrow, Morecambe and Wyre.

Research aims and methods

The evaluation has been carried out by Lancaster University, with the themes of:

- What has worked well in delivering the programme?
- What have the main challenges been?
- What could be improved, and how?
- What are the key learning points for establishing similar programmes?

We analysed a wide range of data that had been recorded by project staff and undertook research with 43 people through five focus groups, five group interviews, one individual interview and four online feedback forms.

We note that none of the data is from a representative sample, so the analysis is indicative only.

Although it remains The Bay's responsibility to produce and share its blueprint, this evaluation can contribute significantly to that process, and we have added 'blueprint top tips' gleaned from the research throughout this report.

Evaluation findings

Project outputs and outcomes

As depicted overleaf, the data strongly indicates that participating in both the specialised sessions and targeted events enables most people to meet each aspect of the five ways to wellbeing:



Specialised sessions	88% met new people	95% have become more active	95% noticed something new	98% learned something new	86% had given something back
Targeted events	90% met new people	100% were out and active at the event	9.5 out of 10 engagement with nature	99% learned something new	95% inspired to take action for nature

Specialist nature and wellbeing groups:

- ✓ The Bay is successfully engaging with people in the lowest 15% of the population regarding mental wellbeing.
- ✓ Taking part in the project is associated with significant improvements in wellbeing.

For all referrals to the specialist sessions up to the end of April 2023 we found that 29% did not go on to attend any sessions, in line with nationally observed patterns in green social prescribing (DHSC, 2023a). A rising rate of referrals in recent months suggests that the project will meet its two-year target of 432 people most impacted by social exclusion and isolation going to nature and wellbeing sessions, and therefore 'engaged in regular positive activity, feeling happier and better connected'. We note that a pro rata target for Year 1 would not have been met, pointing to the need for long term commitment versus short project work for social prescribing programmes aiming to reach communities via referral pathways.

Targeted engagement through community events:

- ✓ The project has engaged 9,380 people, which is twice as many as planned, using an interesting variety of events.
- ✓ 60% of participants who gave feedback had not attended a similar event previously; extrapolated this suggests The Bay may have brought around 5,600 people into new engagement with nature.
- ✓ The average rating for enjoyment of the in-person events was 9.5 out of 10.
- ✓ 99% of respondents said they would like to attend another event.

Whole population work:

- ✓ The project has established an attractive, informative and up-to-date website, with mean page views per quarter of 8,770.
- ✓ The site features some 'self-service' information for learning about local wildlife and local habitats, and 13 downloadable resources, including how to make a bee hotel, and nature identification and beach bingo sheets.
- ✓ It has built a good social media presence; Facebook predominates with a mean reach of 23,574 people per month, 2,152 followers, and an engagement rate of 20%.
- ✓ It has made and posted 14 videos on its YouTube channel.

The project's planned 'whole population' outcome was to have 3,000 wider community individuals engaged in positive nature activities, but, although we can see signs of engagement, we have no way of knowing how many actions for nature have been undertaken, nor by how many individuals. This is a gap that the project's managers are aware of, with self-reporting tools now being designed and implemented.

Business development: the project has met its target of designing and testing three business development opportunities to generate income, although it is too soon to assess their success. It has also, as planned, maintained its involvement with The Eden Project Morecambe, and submitted several funding applications to try and secure the medium-term continuation of the project.

Benefits to nature: The project has undertaken 284 different activities to benefit nature through its nature and wellbeing events and community engagement events; it may also have inspired many more. The actions for nature seem to be an important component of The Bay's offer in terms of creating positive emotions among participants, and therefore encouraging people to attend sessions and events, and to form an active sense of agency and connection to nature.

Project processes

Specialist nature and wellbeing sessions: feedback about The Bay's staff and how they run the sessions was extremely positive. The main challenge has been time involved in developing referral pathways across the wider NHS and community partnerships; staff have had to invest a lot of time in promoting The Bay's offer to social prescribers, who themselves spend a lot of time attempting to keep up with what opportunities exist for their clients. Referrals to the project have been on an upward trend in recent months but developing and maintaining referral pathways will be an on-going process.

Targeted engagement events: most participants heard about The Bay's event through Facebook. They highly rated the staff and volunteers, event location and content of the event. Feedback from event volunteers was also positive about the events and local staff, but they requested a more strategic approach to informing, involving and managing volunteers.

'Whole population': project managers were pleased that, with appropriate training and guidance, The Bay's staff have embraced their use of social media as part of their jobs. This work was led by a part-time Communications Officer who created the project's website, managed its social media, managed communications across the partnership and contributed to marketing the project and its business elements.

Business development: this element was undermined by being unable to recruit a full-time Business Development Manager, despite two rounds of recruitment. To the project's credit staff and partners took on most of the post's roles, although with less intensity than would be possible with a dedicated staff member.

Project innovations

One of the project's innovations is to deliver its wellbeing activities around the coast, making them 'blue-green' rather than just green social prescriptions. Project staff appreciated having access to a variety of 'blue' coastal habitats for their work and many people spoke of being fortunate to live near Morecambe Bay. The desire to 'open people's eyes to what's on their doorstep' was a recurrent theme.

The project is also multi-agency, multi-site and multi-level. All three elements appear to be strengths. As a multi-agency initiative, it benefits from the four partners' different skills and experience, from better funding opportunities, and improved delivery through working with relevant local partners. As a multi-site project, it is delivering work which combats isolation and ill health right around Morecambe Bay, to a footprint that fits with the local NHS trust's area. And as a multi-level project it is providing more holistic support to a greater range of people, and with more benefits to people and nature, than projects which focus only on specialised work with small groups.

Discussion and suggestions

Green social prescribing

The project is facing the same challenges as other UK green social prescribing projects, as set out in recent UK government research (DHSC, 2023b). These include issues concerning funding, and knowledge about green social prescribing among health sector workers and the public. It is also working in a complex context of many environmental and community groups, and GSP-relevant services, which lacks coordination and a single effective searchable platform.

Project staff have invested a lot of time in creating referral pathways, particularly from NHS employees, and 26% of referrals are from or related to the local trust. 50% are self-referrals (some of which may have been prompted by a referral partner), and half of those come via The Bay's social media, its events and word of mouth. Tactically there is a question about whether to focus on a particular pathway and if so which one. Informed by recent research into referral patterns among clinicians and their receptiveness towards GSP (DHSC, 2023a), the project might want to focus on those people who have already referred, those who seem most interested, and those who themselves opt to spend time outdoors. The Bay could also systematise giving feedback to referrers to increase referral frequency. It may also want to learn about self-referrals and the gap that The Bay is filling and why. The project has capacity to involve more people in its nature and wellbeing groups, but faces the challenge of having to continue to seek more referrals, while also running sessions and supporting attendance and 'successful' exits. For the latter we suggest a first step of reviewing the data which is now available and holding a workshop so staff can discuss ideas to increase attendance and retention, and to commit to testing a few 'do-able' strategies.

Monitoring and evaluation

The project has recorded a good deal of data but is only now starting to understand and analyse it. In Section 4.2 we suggest various ways of making the project's existing monitoring more useful, including modifying some elements, and establishing a system to generate useful information about referrals, progression and exit routes.

Volunteering

Part of The Bay's five-year vision in the funding proposal was to have *a resilient volunteer network and people with 'lived experience' involved in the long-term running of the programme*. After just 19 months each hub has former participants of the nature and wellbeing sessions now working each week as peer support volunteers in those sessions, and local groups of volunteers who help run community events on an ad hoc basis.

The community engagement volunteers who attended our focus group (which, we note, did not include any people from the Wyre hub) were positive about the project and its staff, but wanted to be kept more informed about the wider project, and to have the opportunity to be more involved. (We note that other volunteers who were not at the focus group might feel differently; for example, some might prefer simply to sign up for an event, turn up to help, and then go home without further responsibility, or need for any more training or affirmation.) Partly in response to this The Bay has recently established quarterly skills and development days, and held the first one in June 2023, where volunteers and staff meet for training and to discuss the project's direction.

The role of volunteers to date and in the next phase of the project will be one of the themes for reflection and planning at the end of The Bay's first two years. The project staff have successfully garnered the support and enthusiasm of volunteers who are already an asset to the project, and it will be a priority to see how they can build on that good will and energy in the future.

Conclusion

The Bay is an ambitious multi-agency, multi-site and multi-level project which has achieved a lot in just 19 months. It is doing important work, and doing it well. While there are aspects to be improved upon, and there is more to learn, it has harnessed the support of local people as volunteers, established itself as a reliable and useful service for the delivery of green social prescriptions, and engaged large numbers of people with their local environment and in actions for nature. We look forward to seeing its further development, both building on its successes and sharing lessons with other coastal communities, for the benefit of people and nature.

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